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Teaching and Witness in the Life of the Church

Mike Higton

Introduction

I am an Anglican systematic or dogmatic theologian; I happen to prefer the term ‘doctrinal theologian’. But saying that I’m an Anglican doctrinal theologian is a bit like saying, ‘I’m a captain in the Swiss Navy’, or ‘I’m Donald Trump’s head of etiquette’ — it’s not all that clear that the job exists. I mention this because when my title says that I’ll be talking about ‘teaching and witness in the church’, what it really means is that I’m going to be talking about *doctrine*.

I should also admit at this point that I’m a doctrinal theologian specifically *in the Church of England* – and I really need to plead ignorance of the Scottish context. I genuinely don’t know how much what I’m about to say about *my* context will transfer up here; I don’t even know whether Anglican doctrinal theologians are as rare a species up here as they are south of the border. So I look forward to being better informed – or perhaps robustly put in my place – in the Q and A session later.

The ‘Nature of Doctrine’ Debate

I’m going to begin by asking, What *is* doctrinal theology? What is it *for*? And, specifically: *What is the role of doctrinal theology in the church?* The answer will turn out to have something to do with teaching and witness, but it will take me a little bit of a while to get there.

These questions about doctrine have been asked a lot over the past three decades or so, in a debate sparked by Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck in 1984, in his book *The Nature of Doctrine*. He's been followed by various others, such as Alister McGrath with *The Genesis of Doctrine*; Ellen Charry with a book on *The Pastoral Function of Doctrine*; Richard Heyduck with *The Recovery of Doctrine*; Kevin Vanhoozer with *The Drama of Doctrine*, Anthony Thiselton with *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, and Christine Helmer with a book on *The End of Doctrine*.¹ I am, of course, planning on writing my own book, *The Something of Doctrine*, but if you have any bright ideas on what my first noun should be, just let me know afterwards.

These are all books about *doctrines*, and about *doctrinal theology*. By 'doctrines', I simply mean statements of core Christian beliefs, especially those found in classic creeds and confessions, or in the doctrinal bases of Christian organisations—statements that are normally presented as having some kind of authority for Christians, or as faithfully summarising the church's authoritative sources.

By 'doctrinal theology' I mean the processes by which these doctrines or their subject matter are elaborated upon, justified, critiqued, and put to use, in a wide variety of forms and contexts – especially where those

¹ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984), Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: OUP, 1997), Richard Heyduck, *The Recovery of Doctrine in the Contemporary Church: An Essay in Philosophical Ecclesiology* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2002), Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) and Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

processes are driven primarily by attention to the meaning, implications and connections of doctrinal ideas.

So, doctrines: authoritative statements; doctrinal theology: discussion and use of those statements or of their subject matter. Those books that I mentioned are books about the promulgation of *doctrines*, and about the pursuit of *doctrinal theology* – and about both as *activities of the church*. The authors ask: *Why* are they activities of the church? What relationship do these activities – of defining doctrine, of pursuing doctrinal theology – have to the truth? to Christian practice? to scripture? to tradition? to experience?

Doctrine is No One Thing

There is a lot of good stuff in these books, but I have three worries about them, and I'm going to work my way to my own more positive statements by telling you about these three worries.

First, at least some of the authors assume that doctrine has *a* nature – that it is *one thing*. And yet it seems clear to me that there is no one thing called doctrine; that there are, in fact, *many* natures of doctrine, and a tangled history of the process by which 'doctrine' comes to be construed in the various different ways in which we now construe it.

After all, the moment you start digging in to my definition about 'statements of core Christian belief' with 'some kind of authority', 'doctrine' turns out to cover a whole range of kinds of pronouncement, made in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes, with a variety of forms of authority. Paul summarises Christian faith in a letter to a distant church; Irenaeus sets out the 'rule of faith' in a polemic against gnostic

hermeneutics; the bishops gathered at Nicaea pronounce on the shape of the faith and anathematise its upstart distorters – and so on, and on and on, until we’re comparing the forms and functions of the Westminster Confession, the Barmen Declaration, and the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Alliance. It’s not clear that those are all the same kind of thing.

Nor is there one kind of activity called *doctrinal theology*. We sometimes proceed – at least in academic contexts – as if the nature of doctrinal theology were singular and obvious. We discuss, say, the doctrine of the incarnation, say, and we know that we’re handling a particular complex of ideas, and we know roughly how to handle that complex of ideas – the sorts of things its appropriate to do with them, the sorts of questions its appropriate to ask. And yet we also know that there’s a history to the invention of that task. Paul’s summarising of the faith has something to do with his distance from the communities to which he is writing, the inability to wield charismatic authority from that distance, and the need to persuade those communities that they already know all they need to know, to decide the questions that beset them (the deposit of the faith they have is sufficient for them); Irenaeus’ setting out of the rule of faith is part of the invention of the ideas of heresy and orthodoxy, the negotiation of patterns of intercommunion, recognition, and exclusion in the diaspora of second-century Christianity; Nicaea is in part a matter of imperial politics and the need for a different kind of public performance of unity – and so on, and on, and on. The history of the carving out of the space we can call ‘doctrinal theology’ is a rhetorical, polemical, political history – an ecclesial history, a pastoral history.

And it's also, very much, a contested history. To pick an Anglican example of this, think of what happened with the Oxford Movement in the 19th Century. Rather obviously, as well as disagreement over particular matters of theological *substance*, there was disagreement over *method* – over the kind of activity that doctrinal theology was supposed to be, and about the kind of objects that doctrines were. Participants in these debates got trained in different intellectual habits; they used (and published!) different libraries of texts from the tradition; they wrote on the whole for different periodicals; they worked to different standards of excellence, and different moves counted as good arguments for them. *The phrase 'doctrinal theology' meant different things depending on where you stood in that debate.*

And that's just one episode. In the course of the longer history of doctrine and doctrinal theology, all the basic questions I mentioned at the start – the relationship of doctrinal theology to truth, practice, scripture, tradition, experience and so on – were *all* answered differently in different times and places. There are, and there have been, very different intellectual traditions that can go by the name of 'doctrinal theology', each construing the nature of doctrine differently. *Doctrine is no one thing* – and, insofar as they promote unified answers, singular answers, the proposals made by the authors I have mentioned are not so much descriptive, as selective and prescriptive ... and yet the joint between description and prescription is one that they mostly leave out of sight. They talk as if they are describing how doctrine has always worked. So that's my first worry.

Where Does Doctrinal Theology Happen?

My second worry is rather similar to the first. I worry that it is not always clear who is being talked to – or rather, where you’ll find the doctrinal theology being discussed, and who is doing it. George Lindbeck himself, the initiator of the recent debate, illustrates this all too well. For most of his career, Lindbeck was an ecumenist – he was involved in big, mainstream, formal ecumenical dialogues, mostly Lutheran–Catholic. He wrote his account of doctrine in order to clarify the way it was being handled in those ecumenical dialogues; he was writing for other ecumenical dialoguers. *And yet*, he dressed his account up as a *general* theory of doctrine, addressed to nobody in particular; it was an account, he claimed, that should work for multiple contexts, multiple denominations, even multiple religions. *He obfuscates the audience for his arguments.*

It may be more helpful, however, to come at my point another way. Consider my own case, and the forms of doctrinal theology (the particular practices of doctrinal theology) in which I – as a self-avowed English Anglican doctrinal theologian – am involved. I teach doctrinal theology in a secular university department, in Durham, but I also teach a session or two down the road from that department in Cranmer Hall to Anglican ordinands and other ministerial trainees. Then (as some of you now know only too well), I am part of the academic leadership for the Common Awards partnership, and have some kind of role in the oversight of academic standards for the teaching of doctrine in all the partner institutions. I sometimes preach in my local church. I’m a member of the Church of England’s Faith and Order Commission, which is in part a successor body to its Doctrine Commission; I’m on a panel for the Church of England’s

Board of Education, including a very tangential role in the development of some new doctrinally framed teaching materials, that can be used to teach about Christianity in primary and secondary schools. And I could go on.

My point is: it is really not clear to me that any *one* account of doctrinal theology is will cover all these different contexts – university department, theological college, local church, Faith and Order Commission, primary school, and so on – it is not clear to me that any *one* account will cover all the different practices of deliberation and communication that take place in these various contexts. And just as I don't think that the accounts of doctrine I mentioned at the start necessarily do descriptive justice to the variety of differing theological *traditions*, so I don't think that they necessarily do justice to the variety of *practices* of doctrinal theology, and to the different parameters, standards, and needs of those practices. So that's my second worry.

Doctrine and intellectual elitism

My third worry is rather different. It is sparked off by the recognition that there is, in some though not all of these accounts, a tendency towards the Jeremiad. That is, there is a tendency to begin by bemoaning loudly the terrible state of doctrinal theology, and the terrible state of the church brought on by its neglect of doctrinal theology, which has been replaced by some kind of laissez-faire relativism, a lukewarm indifference to doctrine.

These complaints are normally presented as analyses of the situation in which the church is *now*: a matter of current affairs more than history. You begin your book by explaining how it is all going to hell in a handbasket,

and has been doing over the last few years, but you, the doctrinal theologian, are going to solve things. And yet it is pretty clear that people have been making the same complaint for decades – indeed, for centuries. I can point you to worries about the churches ‘falling away from “organized religion,” and with it [their] revolt from “dogmatic theology”’ – in 1929; or to worries about the churches succumbing to the idea that the whole development of doctrine is ‘a gigantic monument of human folly, a momentous aberration of the human spirit’ – in 1897. Or to John Henry Newman complaining that, for many in the church, ‘every man’s view of revealed religion [whatever it might be] is acceptable to God, if he acts up to it; ... [so that] no one view is itself better than another’ – in 1838; complaining about the rise of relativism and the decline of doctrinal seriousness.

And I could go back further still – because this is a perennial pattern in the life of my church (and possibly yours too). The underlying structure is actually, I think, something like a contrast between (though I don’t like this term) folk religiosity and the religiosity of an educated elite: that is, between the rather various, rather inarticulate, rather ‘mythical [and] material modes of making sense ... associated commonly with “the people” at large’ on the one hand, and, on the other, ‘the analytic styles of a class that has [supposedly] “escaped” from myth’, that prizes the clear intellectual grasp and communication of the truths of faith. I’m part quoting here from Rowan Williams’ discussion of Richard Hooker’s debate with Puritanism, with Hooker siding with ‘the people’ – with all their stubbornly limited, patchy, and various grasp of theological truth, against the Puritans, who he sees as

seeking a purification of the church by means of sound teaching: a church organised around the secure intellectual grasp of theological truths.²

There are many questions to ask about that contrast, but I suggest that something like the contrast I have just described – some kind of contrast between folk and elite, or ordinary and intellectual religion – is an abiding structure of the life of the Church of England; there's a constantly reproduced opposition and interaction between the two sides, visible from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries. And this perennial structure gets embodied in many an individual theologian's stance, by means of the trajectory on which that individual theologian's training takes them, as it plucks them from the midst of the folk, and places them in the very institutional factory that sustains intellectual elitism: the university or perhaps the seminary. And the typical product of that training is the young, normally male theologian, who now wears the tweed jacket or black polo neck of academe, and *who knows better than the church how the church should believe* – and who, when older and more regretful, comes to Edinburgh to deliver lectures about it all.

In brief, then, my theory (which I am giving in very broad brush terms) is that this biographical trajectory, which involves moves between institutions, and between the different kinds of formation offered by those institutions, leads to theologians embodying in a certain way a perennial sociological distinction shaping the life of the church, and then expressing that distinction by means of apparently historical claims: doctrine is declining *now*, and we are in a position to restore it. Doctrine is *always* declining; that's how it always looks when you have been on that trajectory.

² Williams, Rowan, *Anglican Identities* (London: DLT, 2004), 32–3.

And I'm uneasy, therefore, about the expressed desire to *renew the church by means of restored doctrinal seriousness* – at least in some of its forms. And why am I so uneasy about this shape? Because, unless very carefully handled – and I do think it can be very carefully handled, and it is by some – it provides an intellectualist account of church life over against the messiness of really existing faith. And yet, I am sure that if I go to my church on a Sunday, and because of my intellectual training can be pretty confident that I know, say, the doctrine of the Trinity better than anyone there – really a *lot* better – there's still *no interesting sense* in which I could claim *thereby* to *know God better* than them. (And that's not because I think there's anything wrong with the doctrine of the Trinity.) But by being able to manipulate the terms of technical doctrinal theology well, better than anyone in the congregation, that doesn't in itself mean that I know God better. If an account of the nature of doctrine can't do justice to that basic hunch (and therefore to the hunch that the role of doctrinal theology can't be to tell people stuff about God that they don't know, because the doctrinal theologian knows God better) – if it can't do justice to that hunch (and I don't think all of them can) I'm going to be very suspicious of it.

So what is doctrine?

And all that now brings me, at last, to more positive comments. I'm going to sketch an account of the origin of doctrine and doctrinal theology, and I'm going to draw on that to talk about two contexts of doctrinal thinking in my church today: story-telling, and decision-making in the context of division. I'm going to try to keep in mind *the variety of doctrinal traditions* (my first worry), and *the variety of doctrinal practices within each tradition*

(my second worry), and to *avoid an intellectualist account of the life of the church* (my third worry) – and I’m going (at last!) to bring witness and teaching into the frame.

Let me start with the experience with which Christianity begins: a scripture-wrapped, God-shaped experience of the human being Jesus of Nazareth, risen as Lord. This experience gives rise to discipleship – to forms of community life, and to forms of individual life within and around those communities, that respond to this Lord. Or, perhaps better, this experience gives rise to the ongoing *negotiation* of discipleship: ongoing negotiation in engagement with scripture, in conversation with tradition and the contemporary church, in interaction with the world – as Christians try to make enough sense to live by, as disciples.

Obviously, because it is an ongoing negotiation of *discipleship*, it involves, unavoidably and centrally, reference back to Jesus. That’s why the most basic shape of the life of the church can be thought of as *witness*: as life corporate and individual that points to, that responds to and so *shows*, the Lordship of Christ – in Christ-focused worship; in endeavours in communal life gathered around him; in mission in his name, and so on.

Now *teaching* is a part of this life of witness: in various forms it *serves* this life of witness, informing it, keeping it in shape, enabling and impelling the processes of negotiation and of reference or pointing that constitute it – and in various forms teaching itself can *be* a form of witness, precisely because witness involves pointing, naming – it involves communicating, proclaiming, and confessing Christ. In fact my very rough definition of Christian teaching is something like ‘communicating so as to witness and so as to shape witness to Christ’.

Various practices that we could loosely group under the heading ‘teaching’ run through this life of Christian witness right from start. We have disciples of Jesus preaching to Jewish and then to Gentile audiences, defending themselves in trials before the authorities, preaching to those already converted, sending letters full of instruction, catechising those preparing for baptism, and so on. All sorts of practices of teaching.

Within this great mess of forms of communication that witness and shape witness, there are elements that begin to look specifically like *doctrinal* practices – confessing the name of Jesus in worship, singing hymns that articulate the content of the good news, pronouncing ritual confessions at the end of catechesis and during baptism, producing flexible statements of the rule of faith in the contest between diverse groups claiming the name Christian, developing conciliar creeds to police the views of bishops, and so on.

You couldn’t draw a hard line around them and say ‘here’s doctrine’, ‘here’s wider teaching practice’, ‘here’s the rest of the life of witness’: we’re dealing with messy, overlapping, intermingling complexity here, which doesn’t admit of such dissection. But in the midst of all this, we do see the emergence of a loose set of key ideas around which much of this communication’s content swirls – loci that become touchstones for comparison, contrast, and argument, and that eventually become articles of creeds and confessions. And it is those ideas that we can begin to call *doctrines*.

Right from the start of this process of emergence, we’re talking about a diversity of doctrinal practices. From a very early date, we see at least the seeds of differing domains of discourse with their own rules. What are the

connections between baptismal confessions and apologetic summaries of the faith? What's the connection between conciliar debate and ordinary catechetical teaching? What are the *rules of play* in each of these cases? But all of these doctrinally shaped practices of teaching are there to support and extend the life of the church's witness, the ongoing negotiation of discipleship; that is the context in which they make sense, the context in which they live.

Practices of story-telling

Consider, for instance, the many ways in which the life of Christian witness involves story-telling. The creed isn't a story; if you'll forgive the technical term, it's 'sort of narrativish, in part'. Christianity isn't *a* story; the Christian community doesn't embody *a* story; people's lives are not in any *straightforward* sense single stories; experience doesn't come in exclusively story form. But the life of Christian witness does irreducibly involve, among *many* other things, some practices of story-telling. In a variety of contexts, Christians tell stories of Jesus, stories of salvation, stories of God's ways with the world.

Think of such story-telling as a family of practices: preaching, children's talks, other less visible practices of pastoral story-telling, and so on – you could probably elaborate the list all afternoon. If you look at those practices, you will find a really complex and flexible set of skills, by which Christians, in response to the contexts in which they find themselves, improvise recognisably Christian stories – drawing on a complex repertoire of themes, motifs, plots, characters, settings, and vocabulary in ways that

are beyond systematisation. Sometimes it's done well, sometimes it's done badly, sometimes it's excruciating – but there's an awful lot of it out there, and a lot of it is sophisticated and complex. *Doctrines*, in this context, can perhaps be thought of as the nodes around which these stories tend to revolve. If you could plot all the lines these stories take, you would find a vast, unwieldy tangle – but doctrines would be represented by unusually intense knots in the midst of it.

In relation to these specific practices, *doctrinal theology* doesn't so much set out the one plot of Christian story-telling, as explore these nodes around which these stories are circling, learning how the story can thread into and out of them. It draws on the history of these practices of story-telling, the ways that these knots in the tangle have emerged over time; it asks how and why Christians have told their stories around them in quite the way that they have. It also draws on the ways that these stories are being told in the present in all sorts of contexts. And such exploration is undertaken, fundamentally, for the sake of feeding back into the process; for the sake of *ongoing improvisation* in such story-telling – to inspire it, to shape it, to give the Christians involved access to a richer repertoire of moves to make as they tell these stories, and of questions to ask of their performance. This is, I think, one of the things going on in a theological education institution like the Scottish Episcopal Institute, when doctrine is taught – or at least it is *one* frame with which to think about the power and success of doctrinal teaching in a context like SEI. Is it both drawing on past and present practice in such story telling, and feeding back, so as to enliven and enrich those practices?

If it works like this, the doctrinal theologians in question are contributing to a set of practices that can be and mostly are fairly healthy without them, and whose gaps and failures they probably won't do that much to resolve: doctrinal theologians are not the producers, controllers, or saviours of Christian story-telling. But, if they do their job well, they might be amongst those who help keep this practice flourishing, and who keep it in touch with and recognisable to other participants. They might be playing a useful, even if not a determinative part, in keeping these practices of teaching going – and so in feeding the life of witness of which these practices of teaching are a part. We are useful, but not strictly necessary.

Disagreement and Division

That is, I hope, an attractive and plausible picture. But I want to focus now on a different use of doctrinal theology in the church, which may make for gloomier discussion – and that is doctrinal theology's role in large-scale debates, in decision-making in relation to the headline issues that threaten the unity of my church and its witness. And to get to this topic, I want to say just a little more about the *development* of doctrine.

Now there are many complex stories to tell of the process of development of doctrine, but all I want to say at this point is that the nature of witness, the role of teaching within it, and the development of anything that looks like doctrine, are all *contested* right from the start. The book of Acts may present a picture of the disciples one in heart and mind, and sharing all things – but the earliest contemporary evidence we have for the development of Christianity is a bunch of letters thrown as missiles in

battles about rather basic questions of Christian self-definition. The earliest texts we have are controversial – and not from controversies between central figures and outliers, but between *Paul and Peter*; we're not talking about a debate between centre and fringe, but arguments right at the centre of the life of Christianity in the first century.

And if we carry the story on from that point, pretty soon we're dealing with ramifying traditions of doctrinal theology – that is, diverging strands of intellectual practice, whose proponents pursue differing patterns of argument, make sense of different kinds of evidence, stand in differing relations to scripture, offer differing accounts of their own development and of their connections back to Jesus and the apostles, and so on.

And from very early on, participants in any one of these intellectual traditions, these strands of doctrinal theology, looking backwards within their own strand, can see how it has unfolded appropriately, faithfully, even with necessity, from the initial deposit of Christian faith – and looking across at other people's traditions they can see only too easily what those other traditions miss, and where the evolution of those other traditions looks arbitrary rather than necessary. But their opponents on the other side of the fence can do just the same in return. On the whole, not many of these strands are susceptible to straightforward argumentative defeat; they can all sustain themselves argumentatively.

And this, of course, raises some serious questions for the practice – the practices – of doctrinal theology in the church. It raises questions that are inherent in the idea of witness to Christ as Lord, as it has been explored in the life – the lives – of the Christian church. Acknowledging Christ's lordship involves acknowledgement of something not in one's own control.

It implies a kind of objectivity, a kind of shared reference to something that stands over against all of us. Lordship implies obedience in some form. Christians therefore can't get away from the question: in the church's various patterns of witness, are they showing, are they witnessing *to the same Lord*? And that in turn means that, in some form or other, the question of whether Christians *teach the same things* is similarly unavoidable. It is not going to go away.

So, if my earlier point, about story-telling, was about how doctrinal theology might support teaching, and thereby support the church's life of witness, this point is about how differences in teaching, disagreements in doctrine, might undermine the church's life of witness. And the problem is that the differences between traditions include *differences over the very criteria by which we might decide on the limits of acceptable diversity* – the criteria by which we might decide whether we are witnessing to the same Lord. And given that doctrinal arguments only make sense *within* particular traditions of reasoning, they are therefore only so much use in tackling disagreement *between* traditions of reasoning – traditions separated precisely by what you can appeal to, and in what ways, to settle disputed questions. And when I say that they are 'only so much use', I really mean that they are 'not much use at all'.

It's no surprise, therefore, that the history of Church of England (to say nothing of the broader Anglican Communion, or the global church) is *not* a history, on the whole, of arguments being settled by theological debate – or of *theological* solutions adopted and promoted by a central authority – at least, not often in such a way that the theological articulation offered by, say, a Synod debate or an episcopally-backed report, or whatever, actually

does the heavy lifting of establishing a solution that everyone can live with. Theological argument seldom solves much, in this kind of context.

So what can we say in the face of this kind of diversity, which cuts right to the heart of our life of witness? Well, just to be perverse, let me offer you a solution that doesn't quite work, even though I'd like it to. Think of me at this point as a slightly dodgy second-hand car dealer, about to talk up a car that has no real chance of passing its next MOT.

I could say that what all of us involved in these differing traditions need to do, first of all, is acknowledge the same basic overall shape to our life together as a church: that it is a witness to Jesus Christ as Lord, as the Messiah of Israel, as God's decisive word to God's creation. It ought to be possible to set out some kind of agreed statement along these lines that will secure wide acceptance in the church, and which can therefore provide a sort of widescreen backdrop, or a *minimal plot* within which to situate our diverse practices of witness. In fact, some kind of agreed statement like that would be needed to enable us to say that, yes, we agree to treat all our diverse practices *as* forms of witness to Christ as Lord, and to allow them to be judged as such.

Such a statement of fundamentals would not, however, be enough to settle most detailed questions of practice – it's simply too broad brush, too large-scale a form of agreement. So the second step in this solution, after the establishment of this foundational agreement, would simply be to acknowledge that we do not have consensus beyond that foundation: we have different doctrinal traditions. And we should – according to this solution that I'm currently trying to sell you – simply acknowledge this diversity. We agree on fundamentals; we disagree on *adiaphora* – on things

indifferent or things accessory. That's what Anglicans do. The pursuit of agreement at the level of ideas is therefore not really on the table, and we should look instead at the question of *practical compossibility*. That is, we should ask: What different shapes of lived witness can actually, in practice, be part of a single communal form of life together? What forms of witness are practicably possible alongside one another, intermeshed with one another? What forms are practically com-possible?

Of course, when you pose it like that – we have agreed on fundamentals, and we're now just looking for practical compatibility for the rest – the question of what unity and disunity might even *mean* turns out to be a very complex and messy question, that has a messier shape than the question of *intellectual* agreement and disagreement. After all, practical unity is a very various and diverse thing. The kind of peaceful and fruitful practical coexistence you can have within a single congregation is very different from kind of peaceful and fruitful practical coexistence you can have within a family of congregations in full formal communion with one another; unity means practically different things in those two contexts. And those are, again, different from the kind of peaceful and fruitful practical coexistence you can have between ecumenical partners. The limits of practical non-interference differ from the limits of conscience, which differ from the limits of active co-operation, which differ from the limits of shared teaching. The question of what you're happy for your money to pay for differs from the question of what ministry from you're willing to accept from what bishop, which differs from the question of what effect you think the witness of others has on your witness, or of what witness you think is given by the very fact of your remaining identifiably a part of the same

church as another congregation with which you disagree. These are all different questions, which demand different kinds of answers; unity doesn't mean just one thing; it's a multi-level, multi-strand reality. Finding a practical way forward as a church is a matter of negotiating together through *all that* – finding a way forward where all the participants can continue with some kind of integrity (as they see it), even though they all have different theological maps, and there's no way that a single theological argument can settle the issues consensually.

So, my proposed solution would start with some shared fundamentals of belief, which set the broadest backdrop within which our disagreements take place. It would then move on to this question of practical compossibility – the complex negotiation of how these disagreements can be lived with in practice, peacefully and fruitfully, and *bearably* (to say no more) for all involved. And the third step – can you hear that strange knocking in the engine yet, or the wobble in the offside suspension? – the third step would simply be to advocate *patience*: to say that, unsatisfactory as this uneasy practical cohabitation might be, this agreement on fundamentals and mess of negotiated cooperation on everything else – well, that is all we have, and *holding together in this way is itself a way of acknowledging the nature of the truth to which we witness*.

Unfortunately, as you'll find out if you buy this car and try to drive it away, this solution doesn't quite work. It remains at least one step too intellectually optimistic – and that is precisely because it is a proposed theoretical 'solution'. I have just given you a lecture outlining a solution, drawing on a set of concepts in order to articulate that solution. And as such, it involves a particular, controversial, construal of *how teaching and witness*

work. It involves a construal of how *adiaphora* and fundamentals work, and, where the boundary is between those two – the things that you can’t change and the things that you can. It presents itself as an *overview* of the field, even though it is actually an *intervention* in it, from one particular point of view. That is, it sounds like a general description of our shared situation, but it funds itself in practice on coinage that circulates *within* specific intellectual traditions within the church, but which is inevitably less well accepted in others – or at least has a very disadvantageous exchange rate.

This form of advocacy may have *some* purchasing power, but if I’m right that our divisions do not often get solved by theological argument, they are unlikely to get solved even by a theological argument about why our divisions do not often get solved by theological argument. That’s a neat attempt at an end run, but it is unlikely to work; it *still leaves solution in the hands of the theologians*. It proposes yet another solution by means of clearly grasped intellectual agreement, even if it is the clearly grasped intellectual agreement to downplay the importance of clearly grasped intellectual agreement. And we’re not all going to agree on that kind of claim.

Don’t buy this car.

I don’t however, want to end on that negative note, and abandon every element of the proposal I have just been exploring. I’d like to keep hold of that picture I sketched of the negotiation of practical compossibility – the whole complex, layered nature of the forms of unity that are possible, and the messy spectacle of participants using differing – indeed, incompatible – maps of the territory as they seek to negotiate a practicable way through it together, while keeping various kinds of integrity that matter to them. And

I'd like to add to that now the fact that their differing maps mark different areas of the territory as non-negotiable – and not in compatible ways. There is *no consensual map in the background*, however bare-boned, on which all the individual maps are based. To say that I am sceptical of a theological *solution* to disagreement and division in the church is simply to admit that the negotiation of ways forward in the midst of all *that* kind of mess aren't, I think, going to proceed by way of overview and consensus. Or, to put it another way, and more concretely, they're not going to be worked out *by the deployment of winning arguments in some kind of generic public space within the church* – the kind of space that has become visible in new ways online, in the tit-for-tats of twitter, Facebook, the blogosphere – but the kind of space that has also long appeared in Synod-as-spectacle, or in the exchange of letters with long lists of signatories in the *Church Times* – the spaces of megaphone diplomacy, or the darkling plain on which uncomprehending armies clash by night. Those are the kinds of spaces within which global solutions are proffered – and inevitably rejected, claims about consensus advanced – and withdrawn, theological overviews floated – and shot down. I don't think that in that kind of space, at that kind of level of generality, that our way forward as a church is going to be established by a winning argument.

However: the ongoing process of negotiation, the exploration and testing of practical compossibility, genuinely fraught and fractious though it might be – that negotiation doesn't only happen, it doesn't *mainly* happen, at that global level. It happens in all sorts of smaller-scale contexts and processes, in numerous differing localities and conversations. It is an awkward dance, and the way it evolves is affected by all kinds of thinking being done by all

sorts of participants in all sorts of ways. It may not make much sense to hope for large-scale intellectual *solutions to the whole mess* – with one intellectual bound, Jack was free – but it *does* make sense, I think, to hope that the ongoing negotiation of the mess might be deepened and enriched and informed, in all sorts of smaller-scale but nevertheless serious ways.

And it is in relation to those smaller-scale possibilities of development that there is, I think, useful doctrinal theological work to be done. There's doctrinal theological work to be done on helping people become literate in their own traditions of teaching and witness – and in the traditions of others; promoting good descriptions of each one's dynamism, multiplicity, and internal questions. There's doctrinal theological work to be done learning to narrate carefully – and generously – the emergence and sustaining and interaction of the multiple traditions that we now inherit; there's doctrinal theological work to be done promoting forms of attention to each other's doctrinal claims that sets those claims in the context of past and present practice, past and present witness. Without expecting, or promoting the idea that such work is likely to *solve* anything on a grand scale, I do think it can make a difference. It can, perhaps, by way of multiple small-scale changes, affect the texture, the flow, and – perhaps, in the long run – even the outcomes of our larger-scale negotiations, our disagreements, because it can *change the possibilities of negotiation*, for at least some of the negotiators involved. I dare to hope that it might therefore be *one* factor, among many others, in allowing us to find new habitable settlements together. Perhaps.

One final comment. It's not remotely enough to leave what I have just said in the abstract – though I have left myself no time to put that right. I'll just say that we need to think about the particular spaces, the particular

practices, within which these kinds of process of mutual education can take place, and the actual practices that will constitute them – coming back to the point I made early on about the variety of practices and contexts of doctrinal theology in the church. The spaces within which this kind of work can take place and does take place are very varied, and mostly quite small-scale. But they might include, I believe and hope, spaces like the Scottish Episcopal Institute. Spaces for learning, for exploration, for mutual challenge – for teaching, for growth in witness, for negotiating ways of life together, including our disagreements. And – I dare to hope – for richly attentive and argumentatively diverse doctrinal theology as one of the things, though *only* one of the things, that might serve the unity, and so the witness, of the church.